

We Were So Soldiers...

Starring Mel Gibson as LTC Harold G. Moore, commander of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, the film is based on the book *"We Were Soldiers Once... And Young,"* written by Moore, now a retired lieutenant general, and Joseph L. Galloway, former United Press International war correspondent and current U.S. News and World Report senior writer.

Story by
Heike Hasenauer

MEL Gibson's piercing blue eyes scanned the moonlit forest as he sprang from the UH-1 helicopter hovering above "Landing Zone X-Ray."

He crouched low as he raced for the nearby woodland, crunching the tall elephant grass under his boots and aiming his M-16 rifle into the darkness ahead.

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Actor Mel Gibson (left) portrays LTC Harold Moore, who commanded the U.S. ground troops engaged in the first large-scale ground battle of the Vietnam War.

Earlier, in the recreated "Ia Drang Valley of South Vietnam's Central Highlands," simulated 105mm artillery and machine-gun fire, grenades and aerial rockets had slammed the LZ's perimeter to eliminate potential North Vietnamese army defenders. Pyrotechnics had illuminated the still summer sky and echoed from the towering Santa Lucia Mountain range at Fort Hunter-Liggett, Calif.

The sprawling Army training post, about two hours south of Monterey, served as producer-director Randall Wallace's stage, and this particular scene depicted the first night of a torturous three-day battle that began on Nov. 14, 1965. It's part of a new Vietnam War movie called *"We Were Soldiers,"* to be released in spring 2002.

The film, starring Gibson as LTC Harold G. Moore, commander of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, is based on the book *"We Were Soldiers Once... And Young,"* written by Moore, now a retired lieutenant



During the filming, a "soldier" helps a "wounded" comrade to a waiting medevac helicopter. In the real battle, 79 soldiers were killed and 130 were wounded.

general, and Joseph L. Galloway, former United Press International war correspondent and current U.S. News and World Report senior writer.

The movie focuses on the first big battle of the Vietnam War, when some 450 of Moore's men were inserted into the Ia Drang Valley at LZ X-Ray, an area the size of a football field, and were almost immediately surrounded by 2,000 NVA soldiers. But against all odds, and at great cost, they never gave up.

"They didn't even think about giving up," Moore said.

"They loved each other. And they fought and died for each other. I want this movie to be about them."

"The screenplay is the best it can be," Galloway said. It begins with the French in Indochina in 1954, with the final act of the French defeat at Mang

Yang Pass, not far from where the Ia Drang battles took place.

In the scene from 1954 the Viet Minh, under North Vietnamese Maj. Nguyen An, destroy a French army battle group. The scene then shifts to Fort Benning, Ga., and the creation of the 11th Air Assault Division, which becomes the "airmobile" 1st Cavalry Div. Wives and children are introduced, and viewers get some insight into soldiers' family life in the 1960s.

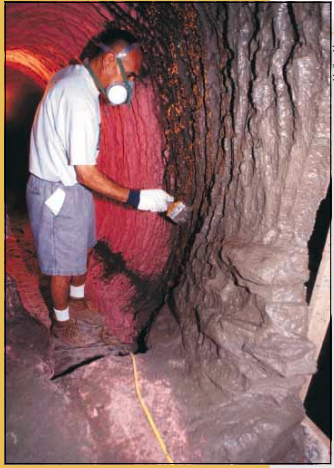
Next come battle scenes and cutbacks to Fort Benning, as telegrams bring the dreaded news that loved ones have been killed.

"*We Were Soldiers*" will certainly be as historically accurate as possible, Moore said. "Randy Wallace had a hell of a job condensing the book that introduced more than 400 soldiers into a two-and-a-half-hour movie." Wallace had to limit the cast to about 15 characters, eight or nine of them core characters.

"The movie will be 80 percent real and 20 percent Hollywood," Moore said. "Randy is portraying the actions



"NVA regulars" charge during the filming. In the heavily forested Ia Drang Valley, U.S. and enemy troops sometimes came upon each other without warning.



A prop-maker paints the interior of the polymerized polyurethane "tunnel" created by set designers to replicate an underground NVA command bunker.

Heiko Hasenauer

"I learned a lot about Hal Moore and have a lot of respect for him," said Gibson, who visited him and his wife, Julie, at their home in Auburn, Ala., in January 2001, after checking out the proposed shooting location at Fort Benning, where opening scenes of the film were shot.

"He had to make split-second decisions under the toughest circumstances, knowing those decisions could cost lives," Gibson said. "He never lost control."

Gibson said Moore sent him books and letters, referencing his Vietnam experiences, "and we've sat and talked a few times. I just like hanging out with him. He's a great guy."

"He gave me advice about the day he took off for LZ X-Ray," Gibson said. "He said, 'I jumped in the chopper. I fired up a cigar. I looked at the pilot, MAJ Bruce Crandall, who also had a cigar. Then, I gave Crandall a thumbs-up, signaling him to take off.' He had a lot of gestures."

Greg Kinnear plays Crandall, who commanded Company A, 229th Assault Helicopter Bn., the unit that

airlifted Moore's battalion into the Ia Drang Valley with its 16 UH-1D Hueys.

Others in the cast include Madeleine Stowe, as Moore's wife, Julie; Barry Pepper as Galloway; Sam Elliot as SGM Basil Plumley; and Chris Klein as 2LT John Lance Geoghegan, who was killed while attempting to rescue one of his wounded men.

"Physically, this movie isn't different from others I've made," Gibson said. "A particular challenge, though, is that this is closer to home; in other war movies, the people who were there aren't living. Previous Vietnam War movies focused on the negative aspects of the war — the drugs, the political problems. This movie will be a monument to the courage and heroism of the Vietnam veterans."

"I can't get flashbacks, because I wasn't there," said Gibson. "I was just a little kid. But I understand what we're doing, and the desperate nature of the situation the soldiers at Ia Drang were in. I met nine of the survivors. They really helped me understand what they experienced. I'd like to say: This time, we'll get it right."

"I want this film to be a film of reconciliation and healing, a time for Americans — those who wanted us to

of soldiers in battle and the impact of the war back home. The latter dimension has never been fully covered in a movie. And he's portraying the Vietnamese soldier as a damn good soldier, who fought well."

Before signing over movie rights to their book, the authors wanted assurance that the movie would not focus on the politics of the war, but serve as a tribute to the many brave young men who fought and died in Vietnam.

To that end, Galloway asked Wallace if he believes in heroes.

Wallace, who'd just finished making "Braveheart," replied: "Have you seen 'Braveheart'? If you have, you know what I believe in."

Gibson will certainly do the story justice," Moore added. "He's the best actor in the world," with movies that include "Lethal Weapon," and its sequels, "Conspiracy Theory," and, more recently, "The Patriot" and "What Women Want" to his credit.

"He's drawn to films about how ordinary men perform in extraordinary circumstances," said his publicist, Rachel Aberly.

Heiko Hasenauer



The UH-1H helicopters used as set dressing during the filming at Fort Hunter-Liggett were provided by the California National Guard.

The production company has gone to great lengths to ensure that the film is historically accurate.



Production crews worked hard to obtain authentic period weapons, uniforms and equipment — such as the medical equipment viewers will see in the "first-aid tent."

Heiko Hasenauer

pull out of the war and those who supported the war — to forgive each other," Wallace said.

The production company has gone to great lengths to ensure that the film is historically accurate, said Arthur Burson, a former XVIII Airborne Corps soldier who served in Operation Desert Storm and is an extra in the film.

Most extras who appear in the movie are Fort Benning soldiers or California National Guard personnel, but active-duty soldiers from California and former soldiers also got involved. Cambodians who reside in California play the roles of Vietnamese soldiers.

CPT Brian Linville, an active-duty soldier assigned to the 229th Military Intelligence Bn., at California's Presidio of Monterey, took leave to be in the film.

During a week of night shooting, Linville, who is studying Arabic at the Defense Language Institute, spent time walking around with a make-believe grazed-shoulder wound, bloodied with Karo syrup and red dye. In the film,

he's a wounded soldier being extracted from LZ X-Ray. In another scene, he plays SPC Gray, a soldier at the battalion base camp who cheers on the helicopters going into battle.

MAJ Lee Reynolds, a Reservist with the 361st Press Camp Headquarters at Fort Totten, N.Y., landed a job as an assistant technical advisor to the film, based on his background in air-assault operations. Reynolds also helped run the actors' boot camp and has a small speaking role as a door gunner on Greg Kinnear's helicopter. The part-time actor, who has appeared in regional TV commercials in New York, works as entertainment coordinator for the New York Mets.

As the Defense Department project officer on the film, SFC William Homann played a significant role in the film's production, said Wallace.

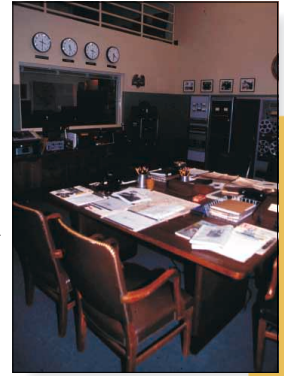
Homann provided the production company with points of contact for research, and coordinated with active Army and National Guard units for personnel, equipment and land. He also located technical advisors for the film — former Ranger Training Brigade

instructor Jason Powell and current instructor CPT Chip Colbert. "The director might tell me he wants a formation of soldiers," Colbert said. "Powell and I show the actors how to carry, load and fire their weapons, and explain how they interact with each other for support. Then we monitor the filming. If it's bogus, we correct it."

Colbert reviewed the film script for accuracy, too, and recommended a number of dialog changes. He also arranged a two-week basic training course at Fort Benning for the principal actors and producer-director Wallace.

"It won't be part of the movie," Colbert said, "but it was conducted to familiarize the actors with how the Army operates."

The 75-member production design team spent four months researching the Ia Drang Valley battles before constructing and painting sets and collect-



The film's equally authentic-looking "Saigon War Room" was built inside an auditorium at Fort Hunter-Liggett's headquarters building and furnished with period items.

"I want this film to be a film of reconciliation and healing, a time for Americans — those who wanted us to pull out of the war and those who supported the war — to forgive each other."



The mock headquarters of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, was constructed at Fort Hunter-Liggett. Production crews planted some 600 trees in and around the sets.

ing set "dressings" such as vehicles and objects that would have been on hand at the time, said set decorator Gary Fettis.

Production designer Tom Sanders, who designed the sets for "Saving Private Ryan" and "Braveheart," took charge of creative design for this movie," Fettis said.

Sanders' greatest challenge was "finding an icon of a mountain with a valley below it that came close to the Ia Drang Valley," he said. He was ultimately responsible for some 50 sets, collectively, at Forts Hunter-Liggett and Benning.

At Fort Benning, period authenticity required the addition of porches onto existing quarters; duplicating the interior of Moore's house inside an aircraft hangar; and making rifle range, aircraft hangar and guard shack modifications, Homann said. A huge parade scene — the send-off of troops to Vietnam — was filmed at the post's Dough Boy Stadium.

Prop-maker foreman Michael Crowe was tasked to build the underground command bunker of the NVA commander. Constructed inside a Quonset hut at Fort Hunter-Liggett, the bunker was fabricated from painted 8-foot-tall, 2-foot-wide sheets of polymerized polyurethane. When completed, the "rock" tunnel was about 95 feet long and 32 feet wide.

In recreating the Ia Drang Valley landscape, the production crew's greens people planted 600 sycamore and beech trees that the post will be able to keep when filming is completed.

They also bought up all the elephant grass from all the nurseries in California and planted it, Fettis said, eliminat-

ing Yellow Star Thistle, a destructive weed, in the process.

For the Camp Holloway set, site of 1st Bn., 7th Cav.'s headquarters, set crews positioned some 15,000 sandbags, Fettis said. And California's 63rd Reserve Support Command provided two-and-a-half-ton trucks as set dressing. The Saigon war room, recreated in the auditorium of the post's headquarters, boasted a huge, glass-encased tactical terrain board, 1960s-era communications equipment, and magazines, cigarette cases and furniture.

A company in Santa Paula, Calif., provided early Vietnam-era tents, mortar crates, medical supplies and tactical maps, Fettis said. And civilian aviators provided the six Hueys used in flying sequences, said aerial coordinator Cliff Fleming.

Visual effects supervisor Dave Goldberg, anticipating the challenge of creating a squadron of 22 helicopters, said: "We have six helicopters in the air at a time, so we'll shoot the real ones several times, then cut and paste them into the scene and use computer-generated helicopters."

A private owner in San Diego, Calif., and the Chinot Air Museum, also in California, each provided one



With the addition of actors, extras, vehicles and aircraft, the "base camp" built in the middle of a California valley realistically depicted the actual Vietnam location.

A1E Skyraider. The close-support fighter-bomber carried 500-pound bombs and napalm canisters in Vietnam, Fleming said. Hueys used as set dressing were provided by the Georgia and California National Guards. The latter also provided the only U.S. military aircraft that flies in the film, a CH-47 Chinook, and some M-101A howitzers used to recreate Firebase Falcon, which supported LZ X-Ray.

"We have a lot of battle footage that needs real tracers added," Goldberg said. "We'll capture that during a live-fire exercise and recreate it on a shot-by-shot basis in the computer." Some sound effects for the film were recorded from live-fire training events.

The film unit's armorer, Mike

Papac, who owns a company called Cinema Weaponry, furnished some 250 weapons, among them M-79 grenade launchers, M-60 machine guns, .45-cal. pistols and M-29A1 mortars. He also supplied M-16E1 rifles, the weapon developed after the M-16 and before the M-16A1.

"The M-16E1 didn't have a flash suppressor, so we tooled them to appear as though they fire live rounds, complete with muzzle flash," Papac said.

The Vietnamese used everything from U.S. to Russian and French weapons. So Papac also provided French MAT-49 submachine guns and MAS-36 rifles, and Russian PPSH-41 and PPS-43 submachine guns. "And because there are few actual AK-47s around, we manufactured those,"

Papac said. All the weapons were adapted to fire custom blank rounds.

Special effects coordinator Paul Lombardi said visuals for the film are mostly created with pyrotechnics. But high explosives, high-pressure air and gasoline are also used.

To simulate a napalm drop, for example, a real napalm canister was used as a model. Gasoline and blasting devices were used to atomize the gas, causing it to burn quickly.

For uniform accuracy, the film's costume designer, Mike Boyd, found actual period burlap and bought thousands of yards of the fabric. He had it dyed to just the right shade of green, and had uniforms made in various sizes.

One of his concerns was that uniforms worn by recently "inducted"



"Soldiers" scurry from a Huey that has just touched down in a "hot" landing zone. The film makers used computer-aided techniques to make six real helicopters look like a squadron of 22.

"Emotionally, it wasn't easy to boil the book down to a two-and-a-half-hour movie."

soldiers at Fort Benning had to look new. "In Vietnam, they had to look stone-washed," Boyd said. "So, we put a little Clorox in the machines when we washed them. And because we're shooting in sequence, we 'age' the uniforms, progressively making them sweaty, dirty and bloodied."

More than 1,000 uniforms and civilian-clothing items, and Viet Minh, French and NVA insignia, had to be made, Boyd said. Some 16,000 pieces of insignia were required for the send-off parade scene.

Before filming began, makeup artist Mike Mills developed "appliances" of foam latex. Made from molds of the actors' bodies, they were to be burned, bullet-riddled or severed during filming, so duplicates were on

hand. Mills also worked with a lot of corn-syrup-and-food-coloring "blood."

Wallace hopes that the countless hours of painstaking research and attention to detail will result in "a movie that conveys what the soldiers in Vietnam went through. It has the perspective of Moore, who led them, and Galloway, a civilian journalist, who observed them."

"Emotionally, it wasn't easy to boil the book down to a two-and-a-half-hour movie. But I've made peace with it," Wallace said. "Viewers will have to decide for themselves if I did the right thing." □

Moore called Gibson, seen here about to engage the "enemy," the "best actor in the world." The actor went to great lengths to accurately portray Moore in the film.



Pyrotechnic devices explode during the filming of a climactic battle scene. Many of the U.S. soldiers portrayed in the film were played by California Guard members and active-duty soldiers based in the state.

An Author's Quest

Story by Heike Hasenauer

UPI reporter Joseph L. Galloway arrived at Landing Zone X-Ray on the evening of the first day of battle, Nov. 14, 1965, after pleading with CPT Gregory Dillon to let him ride in aboard a resupply helicopter.

Earlier, at the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, command post, Galloway had just spoken to PFC Jimmy Nakayama when an American fighter mistakenly dropped napalm in the area. Nakayama and SP5 James Clark were hit. Galloway, with the help of another soldier, grabbed Nakayama's feet to carry him to safety.

"When I grabbed his feet, his boots just fell off, and I remember my hands touching raw bones," Galloway said, his eyes welling up with tears. "We carried him away screaming. I can still hear those screams."

Clark died soon after the incident. Nakayama died two days later.

"There was machine-gun fire going on over our heads, and Galloway just got up and ran to help Nakayama," said retired LTG Harold G. Moore, then a lieutenant colonel who commanded the battalion. "One of my medics got shot, but that didn't stop Galloway."

Galloway had earlier hitched a ride aboard another helicopter to a U.S. special forces camp under siege. Its commander, MAJ Charles Beckwith, told him the last thing he needed was a "damned reporter." He needed someone to man a machine gun.

Galloway got the job. After that battle ended, Beckwith gave Galloway an M-16 that he carried until the war ended in 1975.

On May 1, 1998, at Fort Bragg, N.C., the Army awarded Galloway a Bronze Star with "V" device for valor

for his actions in Vietnam. He's the first journalist to receive the award from the Army.

"That battlefield was the worst place I've ever been," said Galloway. "I'd been in other places in Vietnam, but never at that level of hand-to-hand combat and knowing my life depended on the soldiers around me. We were 20 miles in the middle of enemy territory, surrounded by a force 10 times larger than we were."

The three-day battle at Landing Zone X-Ray left 79 infantrymen and one Air Force pilot dead and another 130 men wounded, some of them horribly, Galloway said. "This happened all around me, in a space no bigger than a football field."

It was followed a day later, 14 miles away, by the battle at Landing Zone Albany, where 154 American troops were killed in an ambush.

The two battles were part of the 34-day Pleiku Campaign, which lasted from Oct. 23 to Nov. 26, 1965. Counting the skirmishes before and after the two major battles, 305 Americans died — more than in the entire Persian Gulf War, Galloway said.

"Hal Moore and I were determined before leaving the battlefield that we'd write a book about the Ia Drang battle," he said. "That was firmed up in 1976, when Hal was the Army's deputy chief of staff for personnel at the Pentagon, and I was on my way to be the UPI bureau chief in Moscow."

"Hal invited me to dinner before I left, and some of the Vietnam veterans were there. We shook hands, promising to do the book," Galloway said.

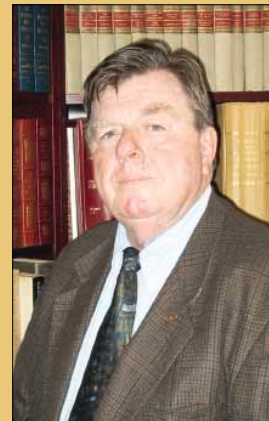
In 1980, after 15 years overseas with UPI, Galloway returned to the

States. Moore was retired and had gone to Colorado.

One day in 1982, "in the safest place I'd been in 15 years — my living room in Los Angeles — I was watching the sequel to 'American Graffiti.' At the end of the movie, you find out what became of the characters. The goofy kid with the glasses who couldn't get laid was drafted and assigned to the 1st Cav. Div."

"He runs from a mortar attack, is hit and vaporizes," Galloway said. "As I saw that, I found myself shaking. I didn't really know where that came from, but I knew if I didn't face it, it would destroy me. That's when I called Hal Moore."

He, too, was ready to write the book, Galloway said. "I flew to his house to talk about the project. From



Joseph L. Galloway

"We entered the project with the idea that it might not go anywhere; there might be two copies published, one for Hal's bookshelf and one for mine."

the beginning, we were both firm that we wanted to go back to Vietnam to conduct interviews with North Vietnamese officials, so we could present a complete picture. And we sent questionnaires to some 25 veterans whose addresses we had.

"We entered the project with the idea that it might not go anywhere; there might be two copies published, one for Hal's bookshelf and one for mine. We figured no one wanted to know about the Vietnam War," Galloway said.

At that time, too, the men agreed that all proceeds from the sale of the book would go to a scholarship fund for the children and grandchildren of soldiers killed in the Ia Drang Valley. That fund was created through the 1st Cav. Div. Association five years ago.

To date, some 400,000 copies of

"We Were Soldiers Once ... And Young" have been sold, and \$250,000 has gone into the fund. Additionally, on the first day of principal filming at Fort Benning, Ga. — where sets recreated the 1963 formation of the 11th Air Assault Div. — the movie's producers donated \$50,000 to the fund, Galloway said.

The book required 10 years of research, from 1982 to 1992. Its publication followed a U.S. News and World Report cover story by Galloway on Oct. 29, 1990, the 25th anniversary of the battles at Ia Drang.

Galloway's anniversary story appeared at a time when America was preparing for war in the Persian Gulf and hadn't reconciled thoughts about Vietnam, he said.

To his surprise, mail flew in by the bags full in response to the story, he

said. And it won the National Magazine Award in spring 1991.

"I was lucky I had such a good editor. When I asked him how much room he'd give me in the magazine for the story, he said 'as much as you need to tell the story. And don't leave out anyone you can make me care about,'" Galloway recalled. "I ran into the president of Random House publishing soon after. He told me the story would make a wonderful book, and he wanted to publish it."

In August 1991, he returned to the States after covering the Gulf War. It was a time when he rode across the desert in Iraq with soldiers of the 24th Infantry Div. "I thanked my lucky stars," he said, "we weren't attacking the North Vietnamese and prayed our soldiers wouldn't be put in an Ia Drang-like battle. I thought, 'These guys don't need to experience that.'"

He took leave from U.S. News and World Report, "and Moore moved into my house" on a farm outside Washington, D.C., Galloway said.

"We had all our stuff on the floor — papers, reports, diaries, letters, photos," he said. "And we started interviewing 20 people we knew and had addresses for. Every guy we found helped us find a buddy of his." Eventually, the two men interviewed some 250 veterans.

"What might seem surprising," Galloway said, "is that there was very little conflicting information from our sources. The events they experienced were so shocking, so traumatic, that they were seared into their memories."

"Two days before Christmas 1991, we delivered the manuscript, and the book was published on Nov. 11, 1992," Galloway said.

In their book, Moore and Galloway write:

It was a time "when we were young and confident and patriotic and our countrymen knew little and cared less



Galloway was awarded a Bronze Star with "V" device for valor for his actions in Vietnam. He's the first journalist to receive the award from the Army.

about our sacrifices.

"We were members of an elite, experimental combat division trained in the new art of airmobile warfare at the behest of President John F. Kennedy."

"We discovered in that depressing, hellish place, where death was our constant companion, that we loved each other. We killed for each other, we died for each other, and we wept for each other. And in time we came to love each other as brothers. In battle our world shrank to the man on our left and the man on our right and the enemy all around."

"We held each other's lives in our hands and we learned to share our fears, our hopes, our dreams as readily as we shared what little else good came our way."

The fighting set the stage for a war that dragged on for 10 painfully long years. By 1967, some 500,000 U.S. troops were on the ground in South

Vietnam. Three-thousand per month came back home in caskets.

The first big battle at Ia Drang was significant, in lessons learned, to both sides, Galloway said.

"The North Vietnamese wanted that battle. They wanted to test not only us, but our equipment," Galloway said, "so they had a historian walk down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the battle to observe and write an after-action report that the North Vietnamese published and called 'How to Fight the American Helicopter.'"

"They learned the tactic 'grab 'em by the belt buckle,'" Galloway said. "We had it all in spades as far as air power, but they learned 'if you get close enough to grab their belt buckles, they can't drop the firepower because they'll kill themselves.'"

"The lessons we learned were the wrong ones," Galloway said, most notably and tragically U.S. officials' decision to send more troops into South Vietnam when they clearly

knew the war could only result in a stalemate. A kill ratio of 14:1 NVA versus U.S. soldiers seemed to justify the losses and trumpet the U.S. Army's search and destroy policy as a good one.

"The NVA had been fighting for years," Galloway continued. "Their determination was so much greater than ours. They could predict that at a certain time America would turn its back on the war."

Director-producer Randall Wallace first approached Moore and Galloway during a lecture they were giving at Virginia Military Institute several years ago. "After our book made the New York Times bestseller list, everyone wanted to make it a movie," Galloway said.

"People don't realize that when you sign over the rights to your book, you have no control," he added. "It's like giving your baby up for adoption; all you can do is pick the best possible parents. Wallace is the best." □



Simulated explosions light the California night during the filming of a scene in which U.S. and NVA troops engage each other at extremely close range.



Actors charge toward the "enemy" in a recreation of the sort of running firefight that characterized the first afternoon of the real battle.

A Commander Remembers

Story by Heike Hasenauer

I WAS the first man on the ground with the troops," said retired LTG Harold G. Moore, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, during the November 1965 Ia Drang battle at Landing Zone X-Ray.

"As I jumped out of the Huey, I looked up at the mountain and knew the enemy was there," he said. "It was ominously quiet."

Moore later learned that three battalions of fresh North Vietnamese soldiers had come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and were waiting.

"When the fight began, it was furious. The NVA troops came out intent on killing us all," Moore said. About 50 percent of his men were killed or seriously wounded.

"I had trained troopers for 14 months at Fort Benning, Ga., before deploying to Vietnam. We were all family," Moore said. "We were a good, well-disciplined battalion, but very understrength when we shipped out."

Because President Lyndon B. Johnson elected not to extend service tours, soldiers with 60 days or less remaining in service were not sent to Vietnam.

"Before we deployed, I lost 150 men I'd trained. When the battle began, we were short more than 250 men as a result," Moore said. "The commander in chief sent the 1st Cavalry Division to war understrength. That's shameful. That told me he was

interested in the political aspects — not in winning the war.

"With only 16 helicopters, it took us about four hours to get all our men on the ground," he added. "The first afternoon of the three-day battle was a running firefight — a run for survival — with Hueys coming in under fire trying to get the wounded out. There was a hell of a fight the next morning and night, and I realized we were in a historic battle.

"The NVA soldiers were good and well trained," Moore said. "I didn't know it at the time, but then LTC Nguyen An, their deputy commander, had been a major and commanded a regiment at Dien Bien Phu, where the French suffered a disastrous defeat in 1954.

"Joe Galloway, a war correspondent, came in the first night and stayed on the ground with us," Moore said. "At the end of the fight, we looked at each other and, in our minds, I think we knew we'd someday write a book about our experiences."

Moore was promoted to colonel in Vietnam and retired in 1977 as a lieutenant general. For the next four years he helped run a ski resort in Colorado. Then he began research on the book he and Galloway had agreed to write.

He made phone calls, listened to audio tapes and, in 1988, attended the first reunion of Ia Drang veterans.

"As the veterans talked," Moore said, "they aroused

memories in other former soldiers."

In 1990, before the 25th anniversary of the Ia Drang battle, Galloway's editors sent both him and Moore to



Retired LTG Harold Moore, who visited the California set in May 2001, provided valuable information that helped ensure the film's accuracy.

Vietnam to revisit the battlefield for a special anniversary story. They were determined to get the Vietnamese side of the story, too.

Among those Moore and Galloway interviewed were Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who led the NVA against the French at Dien Bien Phu, and Maj. Gen. Hoang Phuong, the director of military history for the People's Army of Vietnam.

A lieutenant colonel historian during the battle at Landing Zone X-Ray, Phuong told Moore and Galloway: "You were like frogs with your helicopters. We thought you had intelligence from our men because you landed right on top of them."

The men also talked to Vietnam's equivalent to the U.S. president. In 1990, following countless interviews with the soldiers who were at Ia Drang, and working from after-action reports, military history files, individual accounts, letters and photographs, Galloway wrote what became the cover story of U.S. News and World Report's Oct. 29, 1990, issue. It outshined 1,400 other entries to win the year's top news magazine story award.

After signing a book contract in

November 1991, the men returned to Vietnam again. This time they "had open doors everywhere," said Moore, "probably based on the candor of the USNWR story." This time they spoke to LTG An, among others.

The subsequent book was published in October 1992 and was on the New York Times best-seller list for three-and-a-half months, Moore said.

Director-producer Randall Wallace bought the book rights for a movie in late 1999, Moore said, after convincing the authors he was the man to do it.

When asked if he gave Mel Gibson any advice on how to portray him, Moore said: "Mel didn't ask me for advice, and I didn't give him any. He's a great mimic and a quick study, very perceptive, energetic and quick-witted. People are going to love him. They're going to hate war but love the American war hero.

"I hope soldiers who see the movie will get the lesson in their heads to never quit. Don't even think about losing," Moore said. "If you do, you've already lost. SGT Ernie Savage, who assumed command of 2nd Platoon, Company B, after his superiors were killed, never thought about losing even though the platoon was cut off from the rest of the company for a good part of the battle.

"I watched a scene of the cut-off platoon, when the platoon leader is wounded and SGT Carl Palmer, the senior-ranking NCO in my battalion below the grade of first sergeant, takes over," Moore said.

Palmer suffered a nonfatal wound to the head about an hour after his platoon's ordeal had begun. As he was lying on the ground, SP4 Galen Bungum helped Palmer put a bandage on the wound.

"Tell my wife I love her," Palmer told Bungum. Moments later, an NVA

soldier threw a hand grenade that landed and exploded behind Palmer. It killed him two days shy of his 40th birthday. It brought tears to my eyes," Moore said. "I wasn't ready for that.

"It was tough. It was like driving in a car with your family, and you're in an accident and two of your kids get killed," Moore said.

Equally tough was answering a question from "the daughter of one of my men who's portrayed in the movie," Moore said. "'How am I going to watch my dad get killed?'" she asked.

Viewers will have to decide for themselves if they can handle the reality. □



Gibson, seen here leading a "charge" during the filming, spent time with Moore before production began in order to ensure that his portrayal of the retired lieutenant general was as realistic and accurate as possible.



Through its focus on about 15 characters, "We Were Soldiers" gives viewers an accurate and ultimately inspiring look at the men who fought in the actual battle.